

GULLS USED TO DETECT SUBMARINES

German submarines posed a serious threat to the Allies. U-boat attacks claimed nearly 13,000 victims among the British alone during WWI. On 7 May 1915 a German submarine torpedoed RMS Lusitania, a British 240-metre-long ocean liner, killing almost 1200 passengers and crew. The attack spread panic, all the more since the supply of food was threatened. In April 1917, the situation had escalated to such a degree that one out of four ships leaving the British Isles was never seen again. Any proposal or creative idea to locate and/or neutralise U-boats was therefore welcome. The Board of Invention and Research (BIR) was established in the United Kingdom in 1915, superseded in 1916 by the Anti-Submarine Division (ASD), which stimulated the military, scientists as well as the general public to come up with solutions. Numerous suggestions were taken into consideration, e.g. using strong magnets, pouring out green paint to obstruct the view through periscopes and even tracking submarines by means of a divining rod. One idea put forward by Thomas Mills, the use of seagulls to detect submarines, got the benefit of the doubt and was further examined. The plan was to train gulls to descend on periscopes so that they would defecate on them each time this 'submarine eye' surfaced. This result needed to be achieved by first teaching the birds that they would find food in the immediate vicinity of a periscope. Once they had been conditioned, they would spontaneously flock around every periscope they saw and give away their positions. The gulls were trained by means of an apparatus equipped with a dummy periscope that was towed by a ship and discharged pieces of sausage or cat food into the water at regular intervals. Needless to say that this original idea never caused any problems to the German submarine fleet ...

Jan Seys



Wikipedia

ANSWER TO THE QUESTION REGARDING THE 'SNAPSHOT' IN THIS ISSUE

On page 101 there is a picture of a ship painted in a strange pattern. This is USS West Mahomet, an American freighter painted in dazzle camouflage (also known as "razzle dazzle"). Painting a ship in geometric patterns – usually in black, white, blue and green – is not intended to conceal the vessel, but to make it difficult for the enemy to estimate the targeted ship's range, speed and heading, as is the case with a bolting zebra. This razzle dazzle was used for the first time during the First World War. Having lost many ships due to actions by German submarines, the British started to paint their merchant and military ships in 1917. Over 4000 merchant ships and 400 warships would eventually wear dazzle camouflage. Each ship's dazzle pattern was unique to prevent the enemy from making classes of ships instantly recognisable. Later on, the art world showed interest in this technique; Pablo Picasso would even have claimed the concept had been invented by the cubists!

Jan Seys

KONINKLIJK WERK IBIS IN MILFORD HAVEN (WALES) DURING WWI

Located in Bredene (near Ostend), Koninklijk Werk IBIS is a unique school, and not just because of its typical navy uniform. Founded by Belgian Prince Albert in 1906 to provide training and education to orphans from a fishing background, this boarding school has evolved into an oasis where children aged 6 to 16 from mostly underprivileged social backgrounds find a safe learning and living environment. Under the gracious patronage of His Majesty the King, this school currently offers primary or maritime technical secondary education to a maximum of 110 students (www.ibisschool.be). When WWI broke out, the school decided it was no longer safe in Belgium. On 13 October 1914, the day before the taking of Ostend by the Germans, the staff and 20 pupils who had stayed behind went on board the steam trawlers IBIS V (O.75) and IBIS VI (O.76) and headed for Milford Haven in Wales (United Kingdom). Milford Haven would remain the haven of refuge for the IBIS students and staff throughout the war. IBIS VI was the first fishing vessel which returned to the port of Ostend under military escort in December 1918. It was loaded with fish, a gift from the Belgian shipowners from Milford Haven to the residents of Ostend.

Jan Seys



IBIS



ON DYNAMITE FISHING AND OPPOSITION TO DEEP-FROZEN MEAT

The creeks in the village of Assenede in the Meetjesland area were full of fish during the First World War. Eel was particularly abundant in the muddy waters. Other fish migrated to the shallow waters along the banks to spawn during the mating season. For local amateur fishermen this provided a valuable supplement to their everyday diet. It turned out they could also learn a thing or two from the German occupiers.

When several inhabitants joined a group of German soldiers who had recently returned from the front in May 1916, they witnessed a very peculiar fishing method. The Germans had discovered by accident that when an artillery round was thrown into the water and exploded, a large number of fish was killed or stunned. They demonstrated that the blast of an exploding hand grenade caused the fish in the water to float to the surface, after which they could be simply scooped up. The German soldiers gave some of the fish to the residents of Assenede, but they had not reckoned with their superiors. When the German officers found out that hand grenades had been used for non-military purposes, the fun was over and they had to hand in their hand grenades at once. This was not just a waste of valuable weaponry, it was also highly dangerous for users and bystanders alike.

Fishing in watercourses fitted in perfectly with the habits of the rural population at that time. The Flemish viewed new techniques such as deep-freezing food far less positively. Experiments with deep-freezing had begun in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. In Belgium the first deep-frozen products were consumed at that time as well. Deep-freeze technology was used during the war, although

this was not yet quite perfect. When a deepfreeze broke down in the middle of the ocean, the only option was sometimes to throw the contents overboard. Meat was one of the products supplied in this way. When the cargo ship arrived at an Allied port, the meat was transferred to a refrigerated truck. The ship would often remain moored in the harbour for a while and the cold stores continued to be used.

Deep-frozen meat was primarily destined to supply the army and was only secondarily provided to the Belgian civilian population. Despite the food shortage and exhaustion, a lot of soldiers were strongly opposed to eating deep-frozen meat. They had an aversion to its taste and colour. It was not until the 1930s that deep-freeze technology became more widespread.

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